

## ON BEING CONSTRUCTIVELY NEGATIVE

Positive negativity?

Edward W. H. Vick

Never say, 'Never say not!'

Sometimes you get the criticism aimed at what you are saying or writing that it is negative. The criticism can itself be thought of as negative, as it suggests you should be, or your writing should be, something that it is not. It is not positive — and of course, that is negative. So where do we stand? You cannot criticise someone for being negative without being, directly or indirectly, negative in the very criticism you are making! You should agree with us but you do not! So there's one thing it's good to be negative about. Does that amount to being positive? For the critic it would seem so! For in making his denial he is providing an illustration of the very thing he is criticising.

The denial of a positive error may be a positive move toward the truth. To deny an ancient worldview is a step toward accepting a plausible one. We may know what is wrong or false without yet knowing what is right or true. A denial may thus be a first step. Negation is often the only way to make progress. So it leaves an opportunity open. He who negates says, 'Think further', 'There's more to be said!' 'Take this as an opportunity!' 'To ignore a negation is to miss an opportunity.'

How often have you been told that two wrongs do not make a right. But one right is very alright? But you can't simply equate negative with error and wrong and positive with truth and right. If you scratch the surface of the logic involved that soon becomes clear. For what the negative is about may itself be negative. What you are denying may itself be a denial. So, what happens when you deny the negative? Well, the denial of a negative produces a positive. 'It is not the case that he was speaking negatively' is equivalent to 'He was speaking positively.' There is a figure of speech called litotes. By means of litotes you express a positive in a negative form, and it is a quite common use. So we say 'it's not bad weather' when we mean that it's rather good. We say 'he's not making insignificant progress' when we mean 'he's doing pretty well'.

To some suggestions or propositions, for example the expression of an idea you have never considered and so have no reasonable basis for understanding, an immediate reaction will often be an abrupt and emphatic denial. An unfamiliar proposal is often met with such an immediate response. For example, If one is denying someone's cherished belief, or making a suggestion about something not previously brought to another's attention, negation is often a natural reaction, sometimes a gut reaction. Being immediate, it may be careless. Later you may think about what you have not thought about before and realise that the immediate reaction was inappropriate. Later you may, for your own reasons, attempt to defend your

immediate reaction. It would be well then to ask yourself why you are doing what you are doing.

The idea of the negative is frequently associated with the idea of criticism: to be critical is to be negative. And the implied corollary is that to be uncritical is to be positive. The equation is not always made so explicitly but there is often an implicit association of the two pairs of ideas. So when you are told that you are both critical and negative it can be made to sound as if you are quite outside the pale of all reasonable and level-minded people, or outside the narrow circle of the particular group. Thus your ideas need not be taken seriously. Pass on to something affirmative, and so more comfortable.

But there is something basically wrong with taking such an attitude and the quicker that the implications of the identification of the negative with the unacceptable are made explicit and understood the fairer we shall all be. There is a condition: provided that the implications are not only understood but accepted, 'taken on board', as we say! We shall treat people fairly and we shall be ourselves treated fairly. That at least is the hope.

The fact is that those who are critical about one being negative are often themselves negative. Indeed they are being negative in the very process of making their criticism. It is a matter of deciding what it is acceptable to be negative about. For critics who will chastise one for being negative there are of course irresolvable paradoxes. 'You're not positive (enough)' is itself a negative. Indeed every positive assertion or command has a corresponding negation. 'Be energetic' means, 'Don't be lazy.' 'It's not a dull day' means, 'It's bright today.' And every negative has a corresponding positive: 'not a hopeless situation' means 'a hopeful one'; 'not an ungenerous person' means 'a generous person' 'I'm not so bad' means 'I'm doing quite well!' So we sometimes use double negatives for effect. 'We shall not do anything where there is no guidance.' (= 'We shall only do something where there is guidance')!

A negative statement may be false or it may be true. The more important question is not whether the form of the sentence is negative, but whether the statement (be it negative or positive) is true or whether it is false, whether it is acceptable or not. Of course it must be meaningful before it can be either! But the critic trades on the implication that the negative is false, or if not false, unacceptable. So it must be replaced by the corresponding positive. The negative is to give place to appropriate affirmations. Such trades on the implication that the negative is questionable, is undesirable, is unacceptable. It is an ineffective, not to say perverse, criticism unless it is properly qualified. Such exclusive attention to the form of the statement rather than to its content and implications is perverse. One should not ignore or reject a statement simply because it is negative in form, as it were on principle. One would not get very far in life if one did. Everyone knows that what is stated in negative form can have quite astonishing positive consequences. That is what is important.

Certainly to dub something as negative is often intended as an adverse criticism not as a compliment. It may explicitly be announced as such. One of my many experiences with editors and manuscript readers was the following. I received a letter in which the secretary reported the conclusions of an editorial committee, whose

members represented divergent and often conflicting opinions. It said ‘This author has in this and in another work been negative and critical.’ This was taken to count against the friendly — one may not say sympathetic — consideration of the MS being submitted. My correspondent observed that readers ‘were disturbed by the possibly negative and critical tone of this work and another you have recently produced.’

In reply, I asked among other things: ‘What is the alternative to being critical?’ Here we must focus on the sources we deal with and the positions which readers are prepared to accept uncritically. The objection seems to be that as the result of the discussion one gets a different account from the one with which the readers are acquainted with and are willing to accept. Hence it appears negative. Part of the objection reason may be that it is unfamiliar and that it takes time and effort to consider, to understand and then to become properly at home with the suggestions.

The alternatives to being critical are being quiet or being uncritical, repeating without examination positions already held and considered to be the only ones acceptable. To be oneself accepted one accepts the common belief or opinion. One does not have to read and understand the writing to do that. What is much more difficult is to recognize and to state the criteria for making critical assessments, not simply that they end up in disagreement with one’s favoured positions. Surely manuscript readers at an academic press should have acceptable

A most effective way of being negative is quite simply to say nothing. You know of an article or a book. But you do not want to discuss it. It happens all the time. You know that it is well written. But you don’t want even to consider its content. So you ignore it. In doing so you are being doubly ignorant. You might even descend to say that the author is being negative, because your cherished viewpoint is being challenged or an alternative you have no desire to consider is being explained. Administrators as well as scholars know very well that they do not need to give an account of a position once they realise that they can ignore it. For such it is the easy way. You do not have to understand the positions to repudiate them. You simply think you know, or have heard or read, that they are contrary to what you desire to believe.

Let us now look a little further about the idea of being negative. For one can recognize two kinds of attitude in this connection. You can be negative about everything. You can be negative about those matters that need to be examined and possibly denied. The former kind (being generally negative) is potentially irrational. The other is a right and proper rational attitude. It deliberately produces confusion to say, disapproving, of a writing is negative when it calls into question some familiar or cherished beliefs.

There is only one way to correct false understanding and so move from error. That is to deny it. That is a stage one in the process of being constructive. One must not confuse such denial with the other sort of negativity i.e., as one might put it, being negative in general outlook. The question is, ‘Is this teaching, this belief, this opinion, in error?’ If so, examination, possibly leading to negation, is necessary. Then construction is already under way. The psychological barrier that produces resistance to such restatement, such constructive criticism, is that often the error being denied is a cherished, a traditional, or an unexamined belief, and one maintained in a context

that opposes any expression of doubt. So opposing the perceived negative becomes a principle, but only if it appears in the guise of a threat.

There is a delightful cartoon in which Snoopy parades a placard on which are the words: 'Help stamp out things that need stamping out.' It is amusing because no handle is given to suggest what it is that needs to be stamped out. But some things do. Some things should be stamped out. But not everything. There must be some demarcation between those that do and those that don't deserve criticism. To confuse the two produces a serious kind of misunderstanding.

Do not assume that being negative is a bad thing. If what is being criticized needs criticism then criticizing it, negating it is good. The blanket observation that a writing is negative and critical fails. The failure consists in not making the important distinction between what should be questioned and criticized and what should not. Indeed it overlooks the important point that when a rational position is exposed to criticism it can stand it and indeed come through stronger than before. The opposition expressed in an unarticulated denial of the negative masks an uncertainty about, even a fear to engage in, dialogue. Discussion with the serious questioner is thus repudiated on principle. That indicates a regrettable insecurity with the positions that one insists on affirming and continue to maintain as beyond any question.

So one confuses the issue seriously by not distinguishing between what needs denial and what does not. He thus saves himself the more difficult task of examining the belief himself to assess (1) whether it is untenable and (2) whether the suggested alternative(s) is (are) true. It is a lazy tactic simply to say: 'It's negative and critical, so ignore it!' That assumes that negation and criticism is a bad thing. That is an irresponsible assumption.

If a position is false and so unacceptable it should be negated and criticised. But in doing so one must make quite clear the reasons for the denial. Then the way will be open for due consideration of an alternative understanding, one which accounts for the evidence available. That, I take it, is what it means to be constructive. Why would anyone want to object to that? One can assess the suggestions on their merits. If you do not want to be considered negative then take a positive attitude, as is appropriate, to the constructions suggested by means of the negative. Suspend your stubborn disbelief, i.e. Abandon, your negative attitude and consider if only as an experiment! But do not dismiss the serious suggestions being made with the vague and unargued observation that they are critical and negative. That is grossly unfair.

What is interesting to anyone involved in the process of education is how inadequate ideas fall away when more adequate ideas are presented, and accepted. Only after this process has taken place can you look back and see how inadequate the earlier understandings were. A teacher sees it take place on all levels. The parent sees it when children come to greater maturity as they grow older. What teacher and parent find sad is the rejection of opportunities for development and maturity of understanding. Those who have passed through the process of developing and maturing are able to see how unfortunate the attitude of entrenchment is, as those who have not cannot see. Sometimes in more extreme cases it leads to obscurantism and fanaticism. There is always the possibility of self-deception. This takes place when one is determined to maintain one's attitudes and beliefs and finds ways for

maintaining them. One searches for 'reasons' to give oneself. One tries to convince oneself even when one doubts what one is believing. One looks for means that one can use to persist in believing what one desires to believe. A bit of healthy negation and cogent criticism seems to be the only procedure for addressing such irrationality.

The non-conformist is a critic whether of positive or negative approaches, attitudes, assertions, commands. The non-conformist has built into his stance the fact of an essential negation. The term 'protestant' also indicates that one has one's roots in denial, not simply a theoretical denial but one which issues in energetic thinking, speaking and activity. This is the activity of protest against a set of teachings, a way of life, a set of demands. The protest is made against a position seen as negative in belief and activity. So the rational thing to do is to negate the negative. That amounts to something positive!

The presence in every green village in the English countryside of the Methodist chapel as well as the Parish Church testifies to the effective and important role which effective protest, and with it other types of non-conformity, has had in the life of the church's witness in England. Something similar is to be said of many, many other countries.

But we must not think that non-conformity is only negative. Because one wants to do one thing one finds sometimes that one must stand in opposition to another. The non-conformists have positive understanding and conviction. This gives them the drive and the incentive in their attempt to make their position clear and their attitude understood. But sadly it is not always discerned that way.

A similar word is 'protestant.' The protest as an instrument of publicising a contrary opinion has become a familiar pattern in the life of our societies. But the distinctive religious use of the term in its Christian context term 'protestant' has not become voided by this phenomenon. The 'protestant' is the believer who finds himself dissatisfied with a tradition of doctrine, worship and authority. The word itself came out of the protest in the sixteenth century against Catholicism. The decisive shift was the discovery of a new authority.

What, since then, is of interest and importance is the healthy presence and influence of non-conformity within Protestantism. Where there are means through which its influence may be felt (in whatever its form) the church is kept alert, healthy, even alive. To achieve the desirable result involves the hearing ear as well as the speaking voice. What is anomalous and disappointing is that an original protest may become inflexible and lead to a society that is tradition bound. What began as a breakaway group may become an establishment a hard and fast community. The original vibrant faith may result in a static orthodoxy, the 'faith of our fathers', 'that old time religion' which must be maintained rather than discussed!

Viewpoint depends on context. By this I mean that the context in which we think or refuse to think. This is a social matter. We think as we do, we are as we are influenced by the context in which we live. Sometimes we cannot choose our context. We are born into a particular context. As we grow older and mature we find that we have lived in several contexts, sometimes simultaneously. In those contexts we reject or endorse the beliefs which were handed to us. We are influenced by many

considerations. Some of these are rational. Some of them are not. But we have an element of freedom, should we have the desire and the courage to make the choice.

When we were very young we had influences imposed on us, perhaps by a dogmatic father, an unsympathetic mother, a domineering school teacher, a gracious but eccentric aunt, a bunch of school fellows. Those influencers are imposed upon us, inherited without much thought on our part. As we grow older we may mature by selecting our authorities. The sad alternative is that we may not mature because we never question the attitudes and beliefs we have inherited. The sad alternative is that those They remain as regulative and normative. One lives within the context they provide, as if there were no other. To one who lives that life it may be a happy and satisfying one. There is no call to deny that.

Sometimes we do change as we come to realise that there are perspectives other than the ones we have only thus far known and have come to take for granted, when we come to be aware that there are other rational viewpoints, other perspectives than the ones we have known and have come to take for granted. For it is the uncomprehending and continuing acceptance of the taken for granted that stifles progress. Conversely it is the questioning of the taken for granted that opens the way to new understanding, to new attitudes, to new decisions.

But can we change our contexts? One thing is certain. You can rest content with the contexts in which you live, move and have your being. You may become so insistent on retaining them, of existing within them that you become enthusiastic, even fanatical. You become so convinced that you will not hear, let alone consider an alternative.

Change of context may just happen. You get a new job and that requires new attitudes. You pick up a book and find attractive ideas in it and pursue them. You go from a cloistered home atmosphere to university and, not willing to resist every new idea, you consider one or two. You meet someone and something in your outlook changes. Shift of viewpoint or adoption of new ideas and approaches may of course come gradually. When at each small stage in the overall process you are willing to let it happen not being negative!